

Q&A : Why does the EU need a Common Food Policy?

Since 2016, IPES-Food has been leading a process of research and reflection to identify a 'Common Food Policy' vision for the EU, culminating in the EU Food and Farming Forum 2018 (May 29-30). This Q&A explains why this rethink is required, and what a Common Food Policy would look like.

Q. Food is cheap and abundant in Europe: why do we need to reform food systems?

A. Current food and farming systems are designed to keep food prices down - but they do so at a huge cost to human health, the environment and farmers' livelihoods. More than half of adults in the EU are now either overweight or obese, leading to a range of non-communicable diseases. Meanwhile, food systems account for up to 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions, as well as driving rapid biodiversity loss and soil degradation. And family farms are struggling to stay in business: one out of four farms disappeared from the European landscape from 2003-2013. In other words, the cheap food model is actually very costly, and cannot be sustained.

Q. Why can't we solve these problems with current policies? Shouldn't we focus on reforming the CAP?

A. A whole range of policies affect Europe's food and farming systems, but they respond to incoherent and conflicting objectives, miss out on important synergies, and allow key priorities to fall through the cracks. For example:

- While the EU has pledged to align all policies with climate and development goals, EU trade policies continue to encourage farmers in high-emitting sectors like meat and dairy to seek new export markets.
- A series of policies and roadmaps have been developed to tackle obesity, but they have failed to adequately address its root causes, including food production incentives that are poorly-aligned with dietary goals.
- Protecting soils in the face of degradation and nutrient loss could deliver major environmental and health benefits, but the EU and its members states have failed to act and the proposed Soil Framework Directive remains stalled since 2006.
- The job-creating potential of sustainable agriculture has been largely ignored in the EU's quest to reduce unemployment and create 'green jobs'.
- While rural development schemes support the viability of small-scale farms, the EU's food safety policies impose a regulatory burden that is too costly for smaller farms.

Q. What is a Common Food Policy and why does the EU need one?

A. A Common Food Policy is an umbrella policy that aligns actions across different policy areas (e.g. agriculture, trade, environment, food safety) and different levels of governance (European, national, local) in support of building sustainable food systems. Getting there requires ambitious and coordinated shifts in food production, processing, distribution, consumption etc. Only an umbrella policy with a mandate to address the whole system can sequence these wide-ranging actions, set a clear direction of travel, and overcome short-term decision-making.

Q. Does a food policy mean shifting money away from farmers? Who would it benefit?

A. Not necessarily. A food policy would in fact allow the logic of public subsidies to be updated and re-legitimized as part of a new contract between farmers, the food industry, and society. By bringing a wider range of actors around the table, a food policy would allow alliances to be built between all of those with an interest in moving away from the current low-cost, high-externality model, and making it pay to farm sustainably (i.e. farmers, sustainable food businesses, consumer and health groups, environmental NGOs etc.).

Q. Would a Common Food Policy cost even more than the Common Agricultural Policy?

A. A food policy would reduce the total costs and inefficiencies of existing policies, and would therefore pay for itself. We currently pay three times for the food we eat: in addition to what we pay at the store, we pay agricultural subsidies to support farmers' incomes, and we pay to compensate for the negative impacts of what is produced and consumed (in particular, healthcare costs linked to obesity and environmental damage caused by unsustainable modes of farming). The *raison d'être* of an integrated food policy is to bring different policies into coherence and avoid these types of costly trade-offs. A food policy would therefore prioritize sustainable practices that do not generate hidden costs (or 'externalities').

Q. Would a food policy give the EU more policy powers?

A. Rather than transferring new powers to the EU, a food policy would require the EU to exercise its existing powers more efficiently and deliver better results. The main purpose of a food policy is to coordinate and align actions across different policy areas and levels of governance. This means setting a clear direction of travel at EU level, while aligning policies at various levels in a way that reinforces the grassroots initiatives that are already transforming food systems around Europe.